

The Politics of Ecology: Land, Life, and Law in Medieval Britain. Edited by Randy P. Schiff and Joseph Taylor. *Interventions: New Studies in Medieval Culture*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2016. Pp. ix + 302. ISBN: 9780814212950.

THE ESSAYISTS IN this collection of ecocritical approaches to medieval English literature and its cultural, historical, and legal environments address a number of very interesting questions and challenge more standard approaches to ecology studies. In what ways do androcentric approaches to literatures of the past miss the compelling relationships between humans, animals, vegetation, and environment depicted in such literatures? In what ways do literature and law intersect in presentations of space, such as the medieval English royal forest? In what ways does nature reflect on and imitate or shape culture? Is there room in intersectional theory for nature beyond the human? Most of the authors in this collection adopt a form of ecocriticism they designate as “materialist”: not so much in the Marxian sense of the term as in the notion of the “lively thinginess” of nature (to appropriate the term invented by Kathleen Coyne Kelly in her article, “Lost Geographies, Remembrance, and *The Awntyrs of Arthure*”). Important and thoughtful questions abound in this collection; easily comprehended, useful answers are not always so readily apparent.

The editors have divided nine articles into three groups, subtitled “Biopolitics and Forest Law,” “Objects, Networks, and Land,” and “Politics, Affect, and Life.” The authors form a veritable who’s who of ecocritical scholarship: Karl Steel, Jeanne Provost, and Randy Schiff for Part 1; Michelle R. Warren, Mary Kate Hurley, and Kathleen Biddick for Part 2; and Joseph Taylor, Stephanie L. Batkie, and Kathleen Coyne Kelly for Part 3. Space constraints in this relatively brief review do not permit a thorough description of all the articles, so more general overviews will have to suffice. The essays on forest law, deer, poaching, and royal hunting—in both legal texts and literature—are perhaps the easiest to associate with the kinds of ecocritical approaches under investigation here. They consistently emphasize the conflicted relationship between human, animal, and vegetable found in forest law and demonstrate how the human—at least in the form of people other than the king—is deprived in this relationship. Deer and trees were protected from exploitation except at the hands of the monarch, who could destroy all with sovereign will. Moreover, the notion of royal forests as “wild” was also conflicted as these spaces were carefully manicured and engineered to produce maximum benefit for royal exploitation. Nevertheless, the wildness of the forest, as a place of Otherness, refuge, and escape, still could

manifest in its juxtaposition with the ritualized condition of human habitation and culture.

The three essays in Part 2 are the most diverse as to subject, ranging from Warren's article on sumptuary law, the wearing of fur, and the prestige of the Skinners Guild in London, to Hurley's explication of Anglo-Saxon-era Lives of Saint Oswald and how the physical soil and material of his various resting places replaced his obliterated remains as locations of the miraculous and holy, to Biddick on the impossibility of royal death and Kantarowitz's idea of the king's "two bodies." These pieces hold together thematically less well than those in Part 1 but each stands well alone as representing various ecocritical approaches to largely historical subjects.

The last three essays are also disparate as to subject, but share to some degree a goal: to make connections between political action, ideologies of "conservation," and physical landscape. Taylor approaches Anglo-Norman historical depictions of the death of William II Rufus—who was killed while hunting in New Forest—and how the equation of dead king/dead deer was presented as a statement about William II's problematic reign. Batkie tackles late medieval political poems criticizing the later years of Richard II's reign and how natural and material analogies, which replaced the names of both the hated counselors of the king and the noble critics of the Crown who were condemned by the "Merciless Parliament" in 1397, formed common tropes in creating dissident messages that were easily absorbed and digested by the populace. Kelly completes the section and the volume with a detailed geological and ecological investigation/reconstruction of the lost landscapes of Inglewood Forest and Tarn Wadling (Cumbria) and their significance to the political overtones in the poetic cycle beginning with *The Awntyrs off Arthure*.

As an introduction to the variety and diversity of ecocritical approaches found in current medieval literary studies, this is a terrific collection. It is also an interesting one for historians who might be looking for ways to address the intersections between law and politics and their literary and literate portrayals. The introduction to the volume thoroughly discusses the history of ecocriticism and the ways in which this collection differs from more conservative approaches. The entire volume, however, suffers from an overabundance of verbiage, overwriting, and jargon that this reviewer found off-putting. The ideas embedded in the articles would be dynamic and exciting to students but few except professionals would be willing to work through the thickets of verbosity to find the treasures inside. The editors' introduction in this context was very much a warning sign: long, theory-driven, and specialized, the introduction did not make the articles

easier to comprehend, even when it worked hard to demonstrate how they were interconnected. Ideas that are more approachable to less expert readers, such as Braudel's notion of the *longue durée*, were not mentioned at all, yet this would have provided a clear foundation to the issues being discussed. Intersectional approaches were mentioned obliquely, but as these are among the most accessible to students interested in the ways feminist theory has moved into the mainstream, intersectionality could have been compared more concretely to some of the more esoteric theoretical subjects in order to provide such readers with an easier hook into the subject. Fundamental ideas that were utilized by almost all the authors, such as their rejection of the de-naturing of humans and the othering of "Nature" that are sometimes found in current politics of ecology, could have been explained and discussed in far simpler terms so that readers had easier access to those ideas. It is frustrating to find such compelling new analysis of well-known material—literary, legal, and historical—embedded in a hard-to-digest package. Perhaps it is necessary to begin with these kinds of collections in order for the ideas to carry through to authors who are more attuned to the needs of less expert and experienced readers.

Despite the difficulties of getting through the volume, I am glad to have read the essays collected in it, and I look forward to the time when the ideas in them are common enough for consumption by non-professionals.

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